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Consumer Smarts: Want your iPhone unlocked? Too bad

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P-I REPORTER

Apple's five-year agreement to sell the iPhone exclusively with AT&T Wireless illustrates one of the biggest consumer gripes about the cellular industry: You (often) can't take that phone with you.

Maybe you want the iPhone, but you don't care for AT&T (formerly Cingular).

Or perhaps you're loyal to another wireless carrier, but its offering of handsets is barely discernible from your kid's Fisher-Price model.

What's a cell phone user to do?

The answer for many has been to buy an "unlocked" cell phone or have one "unlocked" for us. This allows you to take a handset you bought from one wireless carrier and use it on another competitor's network.

Many cellular companies set software locks to control access to their phones to prevent users from doing just that. Some cellular companies argue that they subsidize the cost of the handset in exchange for keeping customers on their network.

So the burning question for all those who are waiting, Hamlet-like, wondering whether to pull the trigger on an iPhone/AT&T combo:

Q: Is it possible to unlock an iPhone?

A: "Neither company will provide an unlock code for the iPhone," wrote Apple spokeswoman Jennifer Bowcock in an e-mail response to a question from the Seattle P-I. AT&T posted its own response on its Web site: "AT&T is the exclusive wireless carrier for iPhone in the United States. If you currently use another wireless carrier, you can choose to transfer your number when you activate your AT&T account."

Long before the well-hyped gadget went on sale Friday, users were predicting on Internet discussion boards and forums how fast someone would find a way to unlock the iPhone.

Whether this was even legal to do so was a gray area until a ruling by the U.S. Copyright Office last November. That decision made it legal for cell phone users to break the software "lock" placed on their phones and move them from one carrier to another.

But it doesn't prevent a cellular company from locking phones, as in Apple and AT&T's case, nor does it require them to unlock it for you, as in Apple and AT&T's case.

Unlocking a phone requires entering codes or a special set of numbers, which a cellular company may or may not share with the user.

Verizon Wireless doesn't lock its cell phones. T-Mobile will unlock a customer's phone 90 days after fulfillment of the contract. Sprint won't unlock phones because it believes customers already benefit from subsidized phones.

Some retailers sell unlocked cell phones. Or many online services, such as the Travel Insider (goto.seattlepi.com/r840),

Even if you manage to unlock a handset, you can technically only switch phones between carriers if they share the same system. AT&T and T-Mobile operate on GSM (Global System for Mobile Communications), which is widely used overseas. Verizon, Nextel and Sprint operate on the CDMA (Code Division Multiple Access) system.

So why would you even want to unlock a cell phone?

It's particularly beneficial to users on the GSM network. Those consumers can take their phones overseas, swap out the SIM card (the smart card that stores your account data), slip in a SIM card through a local carrier and avoid paying international roaming charges.

Asked whether it's possible to remove the SIM card in the iPhone and replace it with another SIM card to be used overseas, Bowcock wrote: "Customers can take their iPhones overseas. It is a quad-band phone. As a reminder, they will need to call AT&T and request that international service be turned on first."

The SIM card is pre-installed on the iPhone.

Macworld, which offers news and opinion about Apple/Macintosh products, calls the iPhone "the most locked-down phone we've ever seen. Not only can you not swap out the AT&T SIM card for one from another network, you can't even swap it out for another AT&T SIM card."

CONTACT US

If you have a consumer question,

we'll try to get it answered.

Call **206-448-8390** or e-mail **consumersmarts@seattlepi.com**.

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